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SOCIAL ETHICS IN HIGH-SCHOOL LIFE¹

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A full and comprehensive treatment of a subject like the one before us is a difficult undertaking; difficult because, like other questions dealing with human relations, it involves so many incommensurable elements. The elements of custom, of feeling, of selfishness, and of prejudice, which enter so conspicuously, have no common measure or standard to which they can be bound. Any institution, organization, belief, or sentiment which is the result of feeling and not the result of reason cannot be reached by means of reason or argument. In our classrooms, with our students and our prescribed subjects before us, our task is comparatively easy and our duty plain. It is here only a question of the best means to a well-known end. If the services of the schoolmaster had a function as clear and definite as is that of other employees in the various walks of life, his burdens would be commensurable with theirs. If we opened our school-house doors in the morning and entered possessed with mature minds, ripe scholarship, and cheerful faces, with clear plans of presentation, and with a sympathetic spirit; if we met our pupils with a friendly, energetic determination to assist them in learning the subjects which we have engaged to teach; and if we at the end of the school day

¹ A paper read before the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, at Chicago, April 1, 1905.

closed our doors with a cheerful "good-night," with a real, genuine feeling of interest for the well-being and success of our pupils, we should certainly be fulfilling the letter of our contract. Should we be fulfilling its spirit? Should we be giving to the pupils, to the parents, and to the school board the full measure of our usefulness? Without class organizations, athletics, picnics, fraternities, sororities, parties, orchestras, carol clubs, glee clubs, violin clubs, dramatic clubs, receptions, and pink teas—without school societies of any description whatsoever—could we still maintain a good school? With our duties as clearly defined as are those of the employees of the post-office, could the public school fulfil the function of state education as efficiently as does the post-office fulfil its function in the distribution of the mails? If social matters were ruled entirely out of our schools and left to the home and the church, would our schools be better or worse than they are at the present time?

This question I shall not undertake in this paper to answer. I am not yet ready to answer it when put in this unqualified form. It is enough here to say that many intelligent teachers of wide experience are beginning to believe that our schools would gain by such a limitation of function.

One of my associates—a lady teacher of rare tact and ability, who has for years voluntarily entered with spirit into the social and literary affairs of the pupils, because she believed they were beneficial—said to me recently that she had slowly and reluctantly reached the conclusion that student organizations of any description whatever are hurtful to the pupils and to the school.

These doubts and apprehensions have probably in some form and in some degree come to all of us. But we have to guard ourselves against these doubts, lest we be influenced by the care and responsibility in dealing with the social life, rather than by the real content and value of it. The existence of a school organization of an evil kind may be taken as an indication that all organizations are evil, or it may be taken as an indication that organizations of a good kind are a necessity. My own experience thus far leads me to the latter view, though at times I find myself wavering and strongly inclined toward the former.

The tendency to organize seems to be inherent and spontaneous,

and manifests itself whenever and wherever large numbers of people are thrown together. This trait manifests itself at all ages from early childhood to old age. It is a natural impulse for the massing of force and power, and has in itself no ethical quality whatever. It is even manifested by the lower animals, who collect and roam together for the purposes of offense and defense. It also contains the social instinct in which the individual finds pleasure in the company of his own kind. This organizing tendency may, I think, be put down as a fundamental fact—a fact with which we have to reckon, whether the task be congenial or uncongenial.

Considered generally, organizations must be recognized simply as natural phenomena. But when we consider them specifically, each on its merits as to its aims, purposes, and ultimate effects on its members and on others, the question at once takes on an ethical quality, and it must be classed as good or bad as it makes for human well-being or for human ill-being; as it contributes to the totality of order, harmony, and happiness, or to the totality of disorder, discord, and unhappiness. The responsibility, then, of meeting and guiding the social tendency of our children seems to be ours by virtue of our relation as parents and of our office as teachers.

In taking this responsibility, we should first ascertain whether there is common ground on which all may stand as a basis for correct opinion. Are there any basic principles of right action which should govern the conduct of teachers and pupils outside the classroom? Is there any postulate by which the social relations of students and teachers may be measured?

It seems that the common law governing the public schools furnishes us the clue to such a postulate, if not the postulate itself, in the simple and well-known provision that the teacher shall be *in loco parentis*; that our relations with the pupil while under our care shall be that of a wise, kind, sympathetic, and judicious parent.

This provision, I think we shall all agree, is founded also upon nature—upon the necessary relation existing between the mind that imparts and the mind that receives. It is well understood by all teachers that, however well we may know our subject, and however ably we may expose it, our teaching will be fruitless unless we hold ourselves constantly within the horizon of the pupils' sympathies, desires, capacities, and interests.

Accepting, then, the postulate that the teacher is *in loco parentis*, it only remains to determine the true social and ethical relations which should exist between the parent and his child. In finding this we shall find our true relation as teachers.

In transferring the analysis of this relation from the school to the family we are not lessening its difficulty, for we shall encounter the same differences of opinion and custom in the conduct of the home that we find in the conduct of the school; but while by so doing we may not alter the nature of the problem, we shall at least bring it nearer to us; we shall see it in a clearer light and in a truer perspective. By taking it home, we shall view it in an atmosphere in which there will be less danger of confusing the real components.

Now, what are these components? They may be considered under two general heads: the rights and duties of the parent, and the rights and duties of the child. It will be understood that these rights and duties which we are here considering are only those relating to the child's mental, moral, and social welfare; only those with which the teacher has to deal. We are not considering the matter of food, clothing, and shelter.

In a well-regulated family the child makes known his wishes, and receives from the parent a thoughtful hearing. His requests for innocent social pleasure are granted whenever they do not encroach upon the rights of others or interfere with his own daily duties. He is allowed pleasure as a recreation, but not as a consuming occupation. It is his *duty* to submit cheerfully to the decision of his parent as to limitations and propriety. The parent judges the proposed pleasure by its ultimate effects on the child's character and on its immediate influence on his associates, and not on the desirability of the pleasure from an adult standpoint—of the pleasure *per se*. The wish of the child justifies the pleasure, unless some evil effect can be foreseen.

The wise and careful parent guards against exhibitions of selfishness and clannishness between the different members of the family. The bright and naturally forward children are taught to assist the weaker ones, and to make them forget the difference between them. In a large family certain ones would not be allowed to withdraw themselves from association with the others, and to plan in secret

pleasures from which the other children were barred; for acts of selfishness and clannishness are not tolerated in a well-regulated family.

Let us suppose, for example, that in a certain neighborhood there are several large families, say of ten children each. These children would naturally associate together, and would likely form societies and clubs for purposes of mutual enjoyment. They would have their picnics, their afternoon and evening parties, and their teas. They might, with the approval of their parents, even have dances. They might form societies for literary or philanthropic purposes; and in their churches, for Christian endeavor.

The cohesive element in all these gatherings is the social impulse—the desire of the young people to get together. At their age, it is probably a natural segregation, whose unconscious impulse is the mating instinct. All this is innocent, natural and even necessary to the normal development of the children.

Now let us further suppose that, after being allowed all these diversions and natural liberties, say, four boys of one of these large families, who were especially congenial to one another, and who fancied that they were a little smarter or better-looking than their other brothers and sisters, should have a secret meeting in the barn and draw up resolutions and a charter declaring that they would not associate with the other children; and further advertise their exclusiveness by adopting a mysterious-looking pin, and by wearing it conspicuously and ostentatiously. Further suppose that at one of their meetings they resolved to petition the father that they be allowed a special table in the conservatory end of the dining-room, and that their napkins and other table ware be decorated with their monogram. Imagine that in leaving the dining-room after each meal they stopped at the table of family “barbarians” and sent forth a cabalistic yell. Suppose, still further, that, finding their numbers too small for the highest fraternal prestige, they visited the other families and called aside four congenial spirits from each, forming Chapters Jones, Smith, Brown, Jenkins, Williams, Adams, Perkins, Baker, Wilson, and Thompson; and that a grand conclave was held in one of the barns; and, finding it too small and lacking in elegance, resolved to importune their “governors” for a “smoke-house” of their own,

going for this purpose to each separate father, bringing to bear upon him the united influence of the self-styled "best boys" of the "best families," uniting their voices in a terrific yell to convince him of their power, their determination, and their solidarity.

Try to imagine the father with the barbaric remnant of his divided family meeting these juvenile patricians, and asking them what it all meant, whether it was not selfish and hurtful to their morals, and very distasteful to the other members of the family. Try also to put yourselves in the father's place when he heard the assuring response that the organization was for the good of the family, and that he would readily concede it if he could only know the inside works; but, the fraternity being sworn to secrecy, he could only take it on faith, and that concerning the "best boys" this faith should come easy to him!!

Now try further to imagine what a father who had allowed things to proceed thus far would do under precisely such circumstances. It may be supposed that different fathers would do different things, but it is highly probable that, if this supposed father was the least bit old-fashioned, this conclave would be dissolved, and that a called meeting of the "Smith Chapter" would immediately follow in the family barn—a strictly business meeting, at which the father would be master of ceremonies and would furnish all the numbers on the program. Following this would probably be a confiscation of the "Smith Chapter coat-of-arms" and a place made for its late members at the family table.

Now, had these boys formed such an organization under other and opposite circumstances, our view of their case might be quite different. If they had been denied all home pleasure of a diverting and innocent character; if they had been kept down to hard lessons and hard work, without relaxation and without sympathy, we could certainly find excuse for their seeking relief even in an objectionable form; for one abnormal condition generally breeds another counter-acting it. We can find some defense for a lot of boys who hold a card party in the attic, or a hole in the straw-stack, if they had been taught that cards and "Satan" were synonymous terms. We could find strong grounds for the defense of a company of boys and girls having a dance in a hired hall, even in a questionable neighbor-

hood, if that were the only place where such pleasures could be found—if all forms of dancing were proscribed as the acme of sin and frivolity. But happily, with few exceptions, such strait-laced methods are no longer found in the home. Here the atmosphere is generally free and natural, and unreasonable requirements are seldom imposed. It is for this reason that the family fraternity just pictured seems so ridiculous, improbable, and far-fetched.

This leads us to the secret-fraternity question as it exists in our schools, and prepares the way for a consideration of the question from a new point of view—a point of view looking toward their cause, instead of exclusively toward their effects.

As to their effects, perhaps enough has already been said in previous meetings and in previous papers. I have covered that ground as well as I could in my paper to the National Educational Association. It is unnecessary to go over the same ground again except in brief review.

Since that paper was read, several others have appeared, notably those of Superintendent Cooley, of Chicago; of Chairman Smith, of the committee appointed by President Harper; and of Mr. Pettee, University School of Cleveland. In all there is substantial agreement as to the effect of these fraternities. The consensus of the best thought, based on the broadest experience, condemns them. They are condemned because they are unnecessary; because they are fractional; because they form premature and unnatural friendships; because they are selfish; because they are snobbish; because they dissipate energy and proper ambition; because they set wrong standards of excellence; because they are narrow; because rewards are not based on merit, but on fraternity vows; because they inculcate a feeling of self-sufficiency in the members; because they lessen frankness and cordiality toward teachers; because they are hidden, and inculcate dark-lantern methods; because they foster a feeling of self-importance; because high-school boys are too young for club life; because they foster the tobacco habit; because they are expensive and foster habits of extravagance; because of the changing membership from year to year making them liable to bring discredit and disgrace to the school; because they weaken the efficiency of, and bring politics into, the legitimate organizations of the school; and because they detract interest from study.

But these fraternities do not exist as an original fact. They must certainly have a cause for their being. They have risen out of certain conditions. If they are wrong, then we must find something wrong in the conditions—some mistake somewhere.

I have already noted the fundamental fact of a tendency to organize, and a tendency to secure pleasure in social coherence. We shall, I think, find one cause of the fraternity, if we go back far enough, in the college atmosphere existing at the time the first fraternity was formed. When this was I shall not even venture a guess; but whenever or wherever this anomalous birth took place I fancy that there existed between the students and the faculty an air of distance; that the professors were excessively dignified, and dispensed a ponderous curriculum through the medium of high-sounding lectures to which the students were required to listen, to catch what they could and to pass an examination upon them; that requirements and memory tasks were imposed upon them such as are never imposed upon human beings outside of college walls; that very little attention was given to the social needs of the students; that a stilted austerity prevailed among the professors which forced a student reaction to get even; that "anything to beat the pros" became a justified rule of action for self-preservation; and that one of the means hit upon was the secret fraternity.

The justification which otherwise honest students find in cheating in examinations probably had its origin in similar conditions. These conditions have improved, but the fraternity still persists, partly from the force of custom and precedent, and partly from other causes. One of these causes lies in that form of selfishness which has always shown itself in the form of some species of caste, the desire to be set apart from the common herd—a desire which nature originally intended as a spur to real worthiness and true merit, but, perverted appears in a desire for distinction of any sort, worthy or unworthy, merited or unmerited.

Since the earliest recorded times, this tendency toward caste has manifested itself. The patrician in some form or other has appeared in every civilization to lord it over the plebeian. The tendency of the best civilizing agencies is to outgrow this trait. The evolution of society is in the direction of altruism; but the secret fraternity is an

example of a sort of reversion of type. It is like sundry other lapses and moral delinquencies to which the boy is permitted to descend when he enters college, but which he is not permitted to carry away from college into the business world.

Whether secret fraternities, as they exist today in the colleges and universities, have any use or justification I shall not attempt at this time to answer, for we are discussing a high-school question. I have been obliged to refer to them in this connection only in seeking their origin in the high school, where they are being formed by our boys and girls in childish imitation of what they see and hear going on in the colleges.

These fraternities, by means of their secret, dark-lantern methods, and because of fear or indifference on the part of principals, have in many cities so persistently multiplied as to become a positive menace to the high schools. As before stated, the consensus of competent opinion condemns them. I shall therefore pass to the problem of handling them, of checking their growth, of abolishing them. To this end I must recapitulate their causal elements, that we may view them in a compact form. They exist (1) for self-protection against unreasonable requirements of the faculty; (2) for social pleasure; (3) for the gratification of the organizing tendency; (4) for exclusive exaltation—caste.

The first of these causes can be removed only by a regeneration of the atmosphere of the school itself. School requirements must be made reasonable, natural, and free from austere and stilted pretense. The best schools of today have outgrown this condition.

The second cause is a natural and legitimate motive, and is met and answered through the working management of the school as a whole. Pupils are allowed to have social diversions in the school building. They have their spreads, their socials, their receptions, and their dances, all in the school building, or other suitable place where the teachers are invited—where they renew their youth, and where they enter into the joys and the sympathies of their pupils. They need this diversion fully as much as do the pupils. It keeps open the life-currents which make the old and the young mutually helpful to each other. It makes better teachers of them and better men and women. It gives the pupils what they crave and what they need in a secure and sheltered atmosphere.

The third cause, the gratification of the organizing tendency, is also a legitimate motive. This is supplied in providing for literary and science societies, musical clubs, etc. These societies should be, and if rightly managed are, adequate to satisfy the organizing tendency.

In the fourth element, that of secret exclusiveness and caste, we find a motive which, although natural, must not be humored or encouraged; a motive ethically illegitimate, selfish, and downward in its influence on character. All that civilization has reached which receives universal assent contains the elements of democracy and altruism. The secret fraternity is wholly subversive of both. Whether we look at it from the standpoint of Christianity, philosophy, or sociology, it is out of harmony with those principles and laws of being which in the last analysis are universally accepted as fundamental.

The application of these principles becomes especially mandatory in the public schools, which are essentially democratic. In a private institution, managed to suit the peculiar notions of its owners, a student who does not like the caste system which he may find there can leave it and be done with it; but in a school supported by the general tax the student cannot escape its burdens by leaving it. He still must contribute to its support. It is plain to see that in a public high school honeycombed with exclusive sets under the name of fraternities, a father may be taxed for the ostracization of his own boy. It is not an uncommon thing to hear remarked that to be anybody in this or that school one must first secure membership in some fraternity. An essentially democratic institution cannot be a breeding-place for social differentiation. The two ideas are incompatible, and by their nature antagonistic. It necessarily follows that the schools must shake off this abnormal incubus, or they are doomed. Let this country become fully aware that our high schools are breeders of caste, or harborers of caste, and taxpayers will cease to provide for their support.

It seems to me, then, that it becomes our duty as schoolmen, first to see that no legitimate cause or excuse for the existence of these fraternities remains in our schools—to see that their legitimate elements be supplied to the pupils through the school at large; and no less to see that these undemocratic, disintegrating forms of the organizing tendency be courageously and manfully resisted.